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ABSTRACT

The ways in which consultants can be helpful in a college's marketing effort are considered. Market research and planning should commence about a year before the admissions cycle begins, and it is best for the college to engage in marketing before enrollments deteriorate. The institution must take an active role at all stages of the relationship with the consultant. Since market research and market planning address central strategic issues facing an institution, the president should be committed to the effort and provide leadership. The president's role is particularly important after the consultant's report has been submitted, when increased political support for the research findings and marketing recommendations is needed. Faculty should be involved in defining central questions, designing market research questionnaires, formulating the plan, and supporting recommendations. The marketing consultant must be a catalyst for dialogue and a source of new ideas that can gain support among the faculty. The retention of current students is important to successful recruitment of new students. Finally, marketing has the potential for enhancing the institution's internal morale and vitality. (SW)

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USING CONSULTANTS IN INSTITUTIONAL MARKETING

by Richard Alpert

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In higher education's new environment of scarcity and competition for students, many institutions have discovered marketing. If "too few customers" is perceived as the problem, marketing is seen as the cure.

But marketing, whether in the sense of "fixing up the institution's image" or "discovering new sources of students," is rarely a cure for an institution's enrollment concerns. A too-narrow view of marketing is like taking patent medicine for a basic health problem: it may make you feel better, but it will not cure the underlying problem. In fact, such a view may worsen the problem by convincing an institution that its difficulties can be addressed by finding the right medicine or the right doctor rather than by discovering more fundamental ways through which it can restore its own health.

Marketing should be a process through which the institution gains control of its direction and mobilizes resources to secure its future. It, is, therefore, a strategic process. Strategy deals with defining the institution's mission, its main programs of activity, and how its resources will be allocated to insure that its mission and programs will be realized. Marketing connects these strategic questions to the institution's competitive environment and seeks to create a competitive advantage for the institution in its current market or some new one.

The key to a market strategy is not simply to define what the institution does well, but what it does or could do better than those institutions with which it competes.

In recent years, dozens if not hundreds of institutions have come to a point of sufficient worry about enrollment to take a close look at marketing. They've read just enough to know that marketing raises questions that are general to the institution, and not just to its admissions office. By the same token, senior administrators may perceive, often correctly, that they don't know that much about marketing and that it raises unfamiliar questions and tasks with which they'll need help. "Let's find a consultant," someone is sure to say.

For several years, I was responsible for developing a recruitment plan for a small, distinctive, liberal arts college. In that role, I found myself confronting broad issues of institutional strategy and the need to reconcile those issues with the more immediate demands of attracting students. Soon, I found myself talking about "marketing." That experience as an academic administrator, and more recent experience as a marketing consultant, has led me to certain conclusions about marketing, the relationship of marketing to strategy, and the ways in which consultants can be helpful in an institution's marketing effort.

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1. Learn to Be a Good Client

Marketing requires that an institution look both outward at its competitive environment and inward at its critical strengths and weaknesses. Consultants can play a critical role in this process. They can provide the research base, detached perspective, and experienced judgment to identify the institution's distinctive strengths. They can establish an order of priority for incorporating those strengths into a comprehensive plan that focuses on the institution's advantages in its competition for students.

However, for an institution to have a successful experience with a consultant, it must not only pick wisely, but also must learn to be an effective client. This means, more than anything else, resisting the temptation to see the consultant as the source of solutions to the institution's problems. An effective consultancy depends upon an institution doing its part. The college must take an active role at all stages of the relationship with the consultant and maintain an informed, skeptical, but at the same time supportive attitude toward the consultant's work.

The consultant can be a source of ideas and a catalyst for institutional action. However, the critical moment for the institution is after the consultant's work is over. For an institution to build on its work with the consultant, it must create the conceptual and political bases for implementation of chosen strategies.

2. Get Started Before the Institution is in Real Trouble

The hardest thing for any group of decision-makers to do is to act before there is a pressing need to do so. This is especially true when controversial and/or expensive issues are at stake. On the one hand, decision-makers abhor crises. Ironically, however, crises are often the only conditions under which difficult and controversial decisions are made. In the case of marketing, acting under the press of an immediate enrollment crisis imposes a particular disadvantage.

A sense of desperation is rarely helpful in dealing wisely with difficult issues. It encourages pursuit of quick and easy solutions. It tempts the institution to overemphasize immediate problems instead of building long-term strength. Effective marketing under these conditions requires more resources and an even greater mobilization of an institution's energies and attention than when enrollment is more stable.

Moreover, the lead time for effective marketing is long. Any effective marketing effort requires research on the interests of students and their perceptions and attitudes toward a given institution and its competitors. This research takes at least three to four months and must be completed before market planning can begin. Admissions, moreover, works on an eighteen month calendar. For marketing recommendations to take effect, therefore, they must be available by October or November in order to be incorporated into admissions activity that begins in March for the class to enter a year from the following September.

Market research and planning should commence about a year before the admissions cycle begins. If new publications are required, the time-table from the beginning to when the publications can affect recruitment is at least as long. If curriculum changes are required, the process becomes even more extended and an on-going planning and implementation period of two or three years is not unusual.

A clear realization of the time-table involved in any serious marketing effort should dispel any idea of marketing as a "quick fix." This does not mean that institutions already in enrollment difficulty should not turn to marketing; it *is* to suggest that it is better to do so before a down-turn occurs. Once enrollments deteriorate, the institution's marketing efforts come to be shaped by immediate deadlines related to recruitment. There is less room for miscalculation, and for revisions in policies, programs, and publications. A shortened process curtails opportunities for consultation and building a base of support for new strategies. Creating and implementing a marketing strategy under these conditions requires extraordinary decisiveness, skill, and wise judgment.

Marketing, whether in the sense of "fixing up the institution's image" or "discovering new sources of students," is rarely a cure for an institution's enrollment concerns.

3. The President Should Be Committed to the Effort and Provide Leadership Throughout the Process

Inevitably, market research and market planning address central strategic issues facing an institution. They expose the internal contradictions, confusions over mission, conflicts about priorities, and disagreements about the allocation of scarce resources.

Effective marketing requires making difficult choices. These choices range from definition of the institution's basic values to the more mundane issues of admissions tactics and the style and sequence of publications. Marketing discipline requires, moreover, that broader understandings about institutional mission and values be linked to practical and operational courses of action.

Because of the need to make hard choices, marketing cannot be separated from the institution's political processes and style. The goal of strategic marketing is not simply to choose the most effective

strategy; it is to find the most effective intersection between strategic choices and what is politically and organizationally feasible.

Only the president in most institutions is in a position to weigh the merits of various strategic choices against political and organizational practicalities. Only the president can pull together the institutional parts into the comprehensive, integrated approach that effective marketing requires. Most importantly, only the president can exert the authority and leadership necessary to gain acceptance of a strategy and insure its implementation.

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The president's role is particularly important after the consultant's report has been submitted. The next step is to expand the political support already gained for the research findings and marketing recommendations. The key is to sustain the loyalty of those supporting the recommendations while new groups are incorporated into an expanded coalition. Some changes in the original strategy may have to be negotiated in order to secure broader support. However, these changes must not affect the underlying *logic* of the strategy; an effective strategy takes its strength from this logic and should not be bargained away piecemeal.

4. Support Market Research

A great deal of campus discussion about why an institution is or is not attracting students is wishful thinking, contradictory, or plainly wrong. Campus opinions are rarely grounded in reliable data and have little or nothing to do with how the institution is actually perceived by potential students. Loose opinion often contributes more to a paralysis of decision-making than to effective action. Instead of helping shape a consensus about the direction that the institution should take. Campus hearsay tends merely to mirror the agendas of institutional factions and adds to a sense of drift and indecision.

A value of market research, apart from the insight that it can provide, is that it focuses the debate about what should be done and provides a common frame of reference for that debate. It thus serves to undo institutional paralysis and to stimulate more creative ideas about how to correct the institution's problems.

5. Get the Faculty Involved

Once the decision has been made to undertake market research, the faculty should get involved in defining its central questions and in the design of its questionnaires.

There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the importance of defining the overall issues to be explored. There are critical methodological and statistical issues involved in the design of a market study, but the most important part of the design is the definition of what questions are going to be examined. These are matters of knowledge, experience, and judgment. On such matters, the faculty are invaluable. They know the institution best and have good intuition and anectodal evidence about what attracts students to the institution.

The second reason is political. There is nothing more damaging to the credibility of a market study than to have a prominent faculty member attack its methodological validity and questionnaire design after the fact. The validity of the research itself is not sufficient defense against such an attack. The issue becomes political, and the only way to address it is for other faculty, including some with expertise in survey research, to declare that they were involved in its design and vouch for its quality.

Faculty involvement and support is critical to the entire marketing effort. The nature of the academic program, the definition of the curriculum, and the way in which students experience their education are all critical bases for the institution's ability to present itself in credible terms. Since any serious marketing effort must deal with basic academic and educational questions, faculty must be involved in formulating the plan and supporting its recommendations. To the extent that a market plan involves curricular changes, faculty must be central to defining those changes, gaining their acceptance, and carrying them forward in their teaching.

The quality of a faculty's teaching and research is a critical factor in a student's evaluation of an institution's quality. Faculty, therefore, should have a central role in presentations to students, parents, guidance counselors, and others. Faculty should not, of course, be used as surrogate admissions officers. They should do what they do best—explain complex ideas in new and exciting ways. Prospective students and their parents should see faculty in teaching situations that convey excitement about learning with the institution's faculty.

The key roles of faculty in the institution's marketing effort have implications for the institution's choice of a consultant. Faculty generally have a healthy suspicion about consultants, particularly those who deal with issues close to their interests and about which they tend to have strong ideas and feelings. It is important, therefore, that the marketing consultant be someone able to engage faculty in intellectual discourse. No consultant can simply tell faculty what to do and have them accept it. The final marketing strategy will result from dialogue stimulated by the marketing effort itself among the institution's key constituencies. The marketing consultant must be someone who can be a catalyst for that dialogue and a source of new ideas that can gain support among the faculty.

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6. Establish Faculty and Institutional Commitment to the Marketing Strategy

In this era of competition and scarcity, institutions and their faculty increasingly become dependent on each other. Faculty have few options to staying at the institution; they depend more and more on it for their jobs, their psychic rewards, sense of worth, and opportunities for professional growth. Institutions also become more dependent on their faculties: the faculty the institution has now is the one with which it will face the enrollment challenges of the next ten years. The college cannot count on faculty turn-over to generate new programs or ideas.

It is the responsibility of the institution to work with faculty on those things that are compatible both with their own interests and abilities and with the institution's overall enrollment strategy. In this process, faculty must relinquish some of its autonomy over matters of curriculum and teaching. The institution in turn must devote resources to helping faculty move from one area of expertise and teaching to another that may be more valuable. Faculty development thus becomes a critical component of a successful marketing strategy. It is through faculty development that the institution and its faculty assure that the foundations for faculty vitality and quality are compatible and mutually reinforcing.

7. Don't Neglect Existing Students in the Pursuit of New Ones

It is very difficult for an institution to recruit new students if a large proportion of its existing student body is dissatisfied and withdraws. High student attrition casts doubt on the effectiveness of the institution's programs and quality. These students constitute ambassadors of bad will; their testimonials undermine the institution's own promotional efforts.

High attrition also tends to undermine the faculty's and staff's belief that the college's programs are effective and of high quality. Student affairs staff blame attrition on the faculty, citing deficiencies in the academic program; faculty blame student personnel for the lack of quality in student life. Other staff blame both and see themselves as beleaguered by dissatisfied students whose complaints about faculty and student life make their jobs more difficult.

Dissatisfied students constitute a problem on every campus. However, when dissatisfaction combines with high attrition, the two contribute to a sense of institutional malaise and hopelessness. The institution can fall into despair and internal bickering in the face of a failure not only to attract sufficient numbers of new students but also to retain those it does attract. Here again, market research and planning can crystallize issues, provide an understanding of their roots, and mobilize the energies of the institution's faculty and administration to find creative solutions.

Marketing, when it is tied to overall strategic issues, can become the catalyst for unleashing creativity and support from all sectors of the institution.

8. Exploit the Marketing Effort for Institutional Renewal

The main focus of the marketing effort must be on the recruitment of new students and the retention of current ones. However, the institution's marketing effort also has the potential for enhancing the institution's internal morale and vitality. Marketing, when it is tied to overall strategic issues, can become the catalyst for unleashing creativity and support from all sectors of the institution. It can become the focus for a campaign of institutional renewal, for a sense of excitement that comes from a commitment to shared purposes and contributing to a common effort. ■